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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the current status of and trends in writing instruction in the Illinois public community colleges. A survey sent to the colleges sought information on admissions, writing courses, course placement, graduation/completion requirements, in-service training for instructors, technical assistance, public service, and general information. Responses from 42 colleges revealed: (1) 82% of the responding colleges administered some form of test to place students in composition classes; (2) about half of the colleges reported that the writing skills of entering students had remained constant over the past 10 years, while half reported declines in skill; (3) the mean number of writing courses offered per college was eight, and all but one of the colleges offered at least one remedial/developmental writing course; (4) the most common in-service support for writing instructors was through financing attendance at workshops, seminars and conferences, and through tuition reimbursements for graduate study; and (5) research on writing in the community colleges took the form of evaluation of special courses or delivery modes, follow-up studies of remedial writing students, and studies of the predictive validity of placement tests. Appendices include the survey instrument, examples of in-service training programs and public service programs, and a list of materials written by faculty members. (HB)

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Illinois Community College Board Report to the
Illinois Board of Higher Education

July 16, 1984

JC 840 596

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Illinois Community College Board Report to the
Illinois Board of Higher Education

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

In cooperation with the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) staff, the staff of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) designed a survey of the Illinois public community colleges to ascertain the current status and trends in the teaching of writing. The survey was sent to the colleges in January 1982. A copy of the survey instrument is shown in Appendix A.

Survey responses were received from 42 community colleges. One response each was submitted by the Black Hawk, Chicago, and DuPage districts which offer a common curriculum at all campuses. This report will summarize the 42 community college responses to the survey under three categories: Admissions and Course Placement; Courses Offered and Courses Required for Graduation; and Instructor Credentials, In-Service Training, and Public Service.

Admissions and Course Placement

Unlike the public universities, the public community colleges use test scores for course placement, rather than for eligibility for admission (enrollment) to the college. Eighty-two percent of the community colleges administer some form of test to place students in composition classes according to their ability, and 18 percent do not. Slightly more than half of those with a testing program test students desiring to enroll in a composition course.* The rest test all full-time, and some part-time, entering students or only those entering students with low high school records. Approximately half use a combination of a standardized test and a writing sample. The remainder use one method or the other. Table 1 on the next page presents the variety of standardized tests used. Most who have a combination testing program use the writing sample as a validity check on placement and reassign "misplaced" students into a course more appropriate to their competency level.

The trend appears to be in the direction of greater use of placement testing. Four colleges instituted new or revised testing programs in FY 1982, six plan to do so in FY 1983, and one in FY 1984. Several other colleges indicated they are actively reviewing their testing programs and expect to make changes in the future. Revision or adoption of a testing program was often related to curricular changes, such as the establishment of a remedial writing program, the revision of the core or general education program, a decision to mandate remediation for those who need it, and/or the establishment of an individualized learning laboratory.

About half of the community colleges reported that writing skills of entering students had remained constant, and half reported declines in the past ten years. Only two colleges felt writing skills had improved. One college suggested that the overall scoring distribution had not changed but that the lowest percentile was scoring lower. Another suggested that there were fewer students with "excellent" and more with "average" skills. There was some evidence that, although there was an overall decline in skill level since 1972, the level stabilized in the past two years.

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*Since all degree recipients must complete at least one composition course, all degree recipients are tested at some point.

Table 1

STANDARDIZED TESTS USED FOR PLACEMENT IN COMPOSITION COURSES

Name of Test	Number Reporting Use (Separate or in Combination)	Cut-off Scores for "Freshman Composition" (if provided)
American College Testing (ACT) English Score	7*	13(2), 15(2), 17(2), 19(1)
Written English Expression Placement Test (WEEPT) by Educational Testing Service	6	27(1)
College English Placement Test (CEPT) by Houghton-Mifflin	4	41(1), 49(1), 52(1)
Test of Standard Written English	1	32
Stanford Test of Academic Skills (English and Reading)	1	
College Qualifying Test (CQT), English Section	1	
College English Usage Subtest	1	
Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS) by College Entrance Examination Board	1	

*Many other colleges require ACT scores, but do not use them for writing course placement.

Courses Offered and Courses Required for Graduation

All but one of the community colleges offer at least one remedial/developmental writing course, with a range of zero to five such courses per college. All offer a full year of "freshman composition," and all but three offer at least one and often several courses designed for occupational/technical program students, such as Career English, Business English, and/or Technical/Report Writing, as indicated in Table 2 on the next page. Six colleges offer advanced (i.e., beyond the first year) composition, and three offer advanced technical writing. Twenty-one colleges reported courses in creative writing and twelve reported courses in journalism. The mean number of writing courses offered per college is eight, with a range from four to sixteen. In addition to formal courses, 73 percent of the colleges provide a "walk-on" service, such as a writing clinic, to help students experiencing difficulty in writing assignments. Three colleges are planning to add one or more new courses in FY 1983, and three colleges are planning to pilot test or establish a writing clinic or computer-assisted instructional laboratory.

Table 2

VARIETY OF WRITING COURSES OFFERED

Type/Title of Course	Number of Colleges Reporting
Remedial/Developmental	41
Composition/Rhetoric I (transfer)	All
Composition/Rhetoric II (transfer)	All
Advanced Composition/Rhetoric	6
Occupational Communications/Career English/ Vocational Communications, etc.	18
Business Communications/Business Correspondence	20
Technical Communication/Report Writing	30
Advanced Technical Writing	3
Creative Writing	21
Journalism	12
Other (e.g., Agriculture Communications, etc.)	6

All but two colleges require completion of a full year of composition for the Associate in Arts degree, and all but four require a full year for the Associate in Science degree. Those colleges requiring less than a full year permit students to select from composition or speech for the second-semester course. There is more variation in the requirements for the Associate in Applied Science degree: twelve colleges require a full year of composition, and 23 require at least one semester, usually with an additional semester required in either composition or speech. In the remaining seven colleges, the requirements vary from curriculum to curriculum. One college is planning to add the second semester requirement for the Associate in Arts and Associate in Science degrees in Fall 1982, and another plans to increase degree requirements in composition beginning in Summer 1983. There is no commonality among colleges in number or level of writing requirements for certificate programs.

The amount of writing and attention paid to writing skills outside of formal composition courses varied among colleges and among disciplines and instructors within colleges. In general, the colleges perceived that courses in the standard liberal arts fields in the humanities and social sciences and the business areas tended to require essay exams, term papers, and/or reports. Four colleges felt that there was more emphasis on writing in other courses now than in the past, while one college felt that fewer other instructors were paying attention to the students' writing skills. One college reported that "term papers are viewed as an upper-division assignment" by instructors in the college. Five colleges have held or are planning to hold a "Writing Across the Curriculum" Workshop, and one college is planning to pilot test this "Linked-Course Model" program next year.

Instructor Credentials, In-service Training, and Public Service

For the most part, writing instructors are appointed and evaluated just as are other instructors. Degrees earned and prior teaching experience are the primary criteria for appointment, and student evaluations and administrator observations are the common methods of evaluation. Several colleges, however, require applicants for writing instructor positions to write an essay themselves and/or to evaluate a student writing sample. A number of colleges evaluate part-time writing instructors more frequently than full-time instructors.

The most common in-service training provided is through professional development funding for attendance at workshops, seminars and conferences and through reimbursement of tuition for graduate study. Twelve colleges reported regular in-service training programs either for all faculty members or for the English department with sessions occasionally devoted to writing topics. In-service sessions have been held on such topics as grammar, linguistics, holistic grading techniques, the writing of research papers, the writing and grading of essay exams, and outlining. (See Appendix B for examples of in-service training programs.) Several colleges have developed special orientation programs for part-time writing instructors in order to assure common expectations and standards for particular courses across instructors.

Technical assistance to school districts is more often informal than formal. The English departments, or department heads, in sixteen colleges meet annually with the English departments of high schools in the district to discuss writing problems and other concerns. Several colleges are planning such meetings for the first time, while five colleges have discontinued the practice. The fact that most part-time writing instructors in the community colleges are full-time English teachers in the local high schools contributes to some understanding between the two systems. (See Appendix C for examples of public service programs.)

Research on writing in the community colleges has taken one of three forms: evaluations of specific courses or delivery modes; follow-up studies of remedial writing course enrollees; and studies of the predictive validity of various placement tests. Individual faculty members have conducted research for graduate courses, theses, and dissertations on the teaching of writing, and a few faculty members have written textbooks for use in various community college writing courses. (See Appendix D for examples.)

Conclusions

Most community colleges in Illinois have well developed writing programs designed to meet the needs of individual students. In part, a perceived decline in skill level of entering students since 1972 has led to increased use of placement testing and to the development or refinement of remedial courses and the establishment of writing clinics or other individualized learning laboratories to meet these needs. The use of placement testing has enabled the colleges to register students for the composition course most appropriate to their skill level and intent. The evaluation of writing programs through follow-up studies of student achievement and studies of the predictive validity of test scores for placement purposes is becoming a continuous process at most colleges.

Degree recipients (AA, AS, and AAS) at all colleges are required to complete satisfactorily at least one composition course beyond the remedial level, while the norm for AA and AS degree recipients is a full year of "freshman composition," comparable to the full year required by public universities. The standards for entrance into postsecondary-level composition courses and for associate degree completion are becoming more stringent statewide.

Despite much publicity and debate, the teaching of writing is still too often viewed as the sole responsibility of writing instructors. This stance too, however, appears to be changing slowly. In-service training programs, such as the "Writing Across the Curriculum" program originally developed by the University of Iowa, and the introduction of such courses as Business Writing and Report Writing have begun to increase the awareness of faculty in other disciplines of the need to pay closer attention to the writing skills of students in their courses.

The advent of increasingly tight budgets may have adverse ramifications on the future well being of community college writing programs. Several respondents indicated concern that the teaching loads of composition instructors were increasing, through an increase either in the number of courses taught per term or in the size of each composition class. Both methods for increasing productivity have the potential of decreasing the amount of writing expected of students and/or the amount of feedback each student receives on writing assignments to the detriment of the students. Across the board course load and class size policies which do not recognize differences in instructional requirements can be counterproductive. In addition, budgetary reductions may place future limits on the amount of funding available for professional development, the current source of most community college in-service training for composition faculty members.

Although most community colleges have developed comprehensive writing programs, a few need to devote greater attention to this vital area. Policy and definitional changes for remedial education and adult basic and secondary education currently under consideration by the Illinois Community College Board, as well as this survey for the Illinois Board of Higher Education, may provide some of the impetus needed for these colleges to re-evaluate the direction of their writing programs.

The community colleges were unanimous in welcoming the concern expressed by the Joint Education Committee and the Illinois Board of Higher Education in the resolutions each adopted on the importance of increasing the writing competency of students and look forward to their continued support.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

The ICCB is interested in learning, through the open-ended survey below, whether the writing ability of students at different stages of their education and in different programs has changed over the past decades, and how your college is attempting to improve the writing skills of students.

For each area identified, please describe as briefly but succinctly as possible what your college's experience has been and what your plans are for the future.

Admissions

Does your college test entering students for their writing ability? If so, what tests are used? How are the results used? How does testing differ, if at all, for full-time vs. part-time students? Have writing skills of entering students improved, declined, or remained constant since 1972? Are assessments of writing skills used to determine admission to program areas or degree/certificate status? If so, please describe. If you have not in the past assessed writing skills of entering students, have you or are you now considering doing so (and why)?

Writing Courses

What writing courses does your college offer for credit and not for credit? What are the primary differences among courses in substance or intent? Have enrollments in writing courses been increasing, decreasing, or holding steady over the past five years? What writing "brush up" classes, if any, do you offer to the general public or for specific occupational groups?

Course Placement

What method does your college use to place students into English composition or communication classes? For example, how does your college determine which students should enroll in remedial writing classes and which should enroll in advanced composition courses? Is a writing clinic or other "drop-in" service available to students? If so, how well does the service work? Is it used?

Graduation/Completion Requirements

What composition courses or competencies are required for the AA, AS, and AAS degrees? For certificates? Do writing requirements differ by curriculum as well as by degree or certificate program? If so, what curricula require additional writing or composition courses? To satisfy graduation requirements, are students expected to complete satisfactorily specific courses or a specific number of credits, or are they required to demonstrate competency in some other manner? Have composition requirements for graduation/certification

changed in the last decade? Are changes now being made or contemplated in the future? If so, what is the nature of these changes? Aside from specific composition courses, are writing skills emphasized in other courses? For example, how extensive is the use of essay examinations and/or term papers or other written reports in other courses? Are tests or papers in other courses graded for grammatical correctness as well as substance?

In-Service Training for Instructors

Does your college provide in-service training for writing instructors? If so, please describe. How is the competence of writing skills instructors assessed? Are in-service training programs available to instructors in other areas whose courses may include term papers, research reports, essay exams, or other written work? Are instructors encouraged to participate in workshops or other programs to learn to improve students' writing skills? Have in-service programs been attempted in the past, but been discontinued? If so, why? Are such programs contemplated in the future? What has been the success or failure of such programs in improving the awareness and attention of instructors to the writing problems of students?

Technical Assistance and Public Service

Please describe any cooperative efforts between your college faculty and public school faculty to improve writing skills of students and/or teachers. What articulation agreements, if any, does your college have with school districts or AVCs regarding writing or composition courses? Does the English or communications faculty meet with the English departments of local school districts to discuss the improvement of writing skills? Does your college either as an institution through the institutional research office or by individual faculty members conduct research on the teaching of writing? Is anyone on your staff considered an expert in the teaching of writing? (If so, who?)

General

We would appreciate any additional information or suggestions concerning writing or the teaching of writing you may wish to share with us. We also would appreciate any suggestions from your faculty or administrators concerning the recommendations of the Joint Education Committee Task Force on Writing Skills (attached).

Thank you for your considerable time and attention. Please be sure your survey response identifies both your college and the respondent. Please return your survey responses by March 1, 1982 to:

Dr. Ann Kieffer Bragg
Associate Director for Research
Illinois Community College Board
3085 Stevenson Drive
Springfield, Illinois 62703
Phone: (217) 786-6022

APPENDIX B

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMS

Program	College
Workshop: Writing Across the Curriculum (a program developed by the University of Iowa)	Belleville, Danville, Illinois Central, Lewis & Clark, Rend Lake
Writing Workshop for Career Division department heads (planned for fall)	Illinois Central
Faculty Exchange with and graduate courses taught on campus for writing faculty by Illinois State	Illinois Central
Special Seminar: Mr. William Coles, University of Pittsburgh (all faculty invited)	Oakton
Special Seminar: Dr. Brian Mihm, Millikan, on critical thinking through writing	Richland
Special Program: Bay Area Writing Project presented by Dr. Bruce Appleby	Rend Lake

APPENDIX C

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAMS

Program	College
English 200: A seminar for area writing teachers on the writing of assignment sequences (1 credit)	Black Hawk
Writer's Center: A local Clearinghouse and workshop vehicle for working writers. Sponsors an annual Spring Writer's Conference	Elgin
Creative Writing Competition for district high school students	Logan
Technical Writing Workshop for Macon County Sheriff's Department	Richland
Expository Writing Contest for district high school seniors	Rend Lake
Essay Writing Competition for district high school students, with publication of award-winning essays	Harper
Story Shop for elementary school students	Parkland

APPENDIX D

TEXTBOOKS, DISSERTATIONS, AND INDIVIDUALIZED MODULES
WRITTEN BY COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY MEMBERS

Author/College	Title/Subject
-----, Illinois Central College	The English 110 Book and The English 111 Book (Waveland Press) for transfer composition
James Miles, College of Lake County	Textbook for technical composition
Peggy Pavlisin, Lincoln Land Comm. College	Dissertation on teaching writing to technical students
Randy DeVillez, Moraine Valley Comm. Coll.	Textbook for first-semester transfer composition
Allan Monroe, Moraine Valley Comm. College	Systems approach package for second semester composition
Leonard Jellema, Moraine Valley Comm. Coll.	Computerized basic skills package
Jeanine Rutland, Illinois Central College	Individualized instruction package
Gy Hughes, Southeastern Illinois College	Modular packages for remedial, first-semester composition, and first-semester communications

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges
8118 Math-Sciences Building
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Los Angeles, California 90024

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